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LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND A FOREIGN PEOPLE:

A Science-based Instruction Unit

Close attention to the differences of perception between oneself and persons of another culture-group is a critical requirement for learning to understand them. A sound procedure is to develop awareness and understanding of:

- 1 - the pervasive influences of one's own culture on mental and physical behavior patterns;
- 2 - the keys to any culture: the beliefs, values, and norms that shape a people's "world view" and "design for living" while orienting and regulating their behavior;
- 3 - the mind's perception faculty ("process") and ways it deceives us in tending -- consciously or unconsciously -- to interpret another people's behavior and man-made environment in terms consistent with our own culture;
- 4 - the need for persistence in searching for clues to a foreign people's perceptions; and
- 5 - the need for continual self-monitoring -- "jogging oneself" -- in order to build habits of awareness of the key phenomena and basic guidelines outlined here.

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An available two or three-hour presentation¹ of these themes includes hand-out graphic aids and clips from two exciting films. One diagram, for example, arms us against the common illusion that words can communicate meanings between culture-groups. A CBS "Special" presents a case study of how early American films exerted an enduring cultural influence for grossly distorting our perceptions of the Chinese. A film from Princeton's Perception Demonstration Laboratory provides live experiences of each viewer's perception faculty being "duped" by the person's prior cultural experience.

The Princeton film leads us to perceive the normal shapes of very common man-made objects which now have been given abnormal shapes completely outside our prior experience. In one case, our minds refuse to perceive that a trapezoid-shaped window -- rotating on its side -- actually is turning full circle. Instead, our eyes are "forced" to report a conventional rectangular window turning back and forth. The end that here is wider than the other is not "allowed" to be reported farther away -- as it actually is during a portion of each complete rotation.

Awareness of science-based evidence of -- and solutions for -- problems of intercultural communication² has been slowly spreading in the 1970s. Yet, efforts to communicate the evidence and the solutions with reasonable accuracy face ever-present obstacles: the distorting -- and unconscious -- influences of the "sender's" and the "receiver's" respective cultures. Furthermore, formal instruction in intercultural communication is still not generally available in our educational systems.

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This trainer's concern with scientists' findings about culture and perception began about two decades ago in the CIA's Office of Training. Our foreign area orientations led to development of guidelines for personal adaptation in broad culture-areas. We drew upon the emerging interdisciplinary field of intercultural communication. The enclosed summary -- "Professional Activities and Accomplishments" -- reflects my long-term commitment to this field.

The message of the first paragraph, above, has been tailored for live delivery to a variety of audiences. These have included: officers enrolled in the Psychological Operations Course at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida; Military Attaches and wives bound for overseas service, at the Defense Intelligence School, Washington, D.C.; and undergraduates at the Washington Bible College, Lanham, Maryland, preparing for foreign missions. Certain classes at the National War College are to be added to this list in 1979.

The undersigned is available -- without obligation -- for discussion of instruction in intercultural communication. References with respect to personal performance and audiences' responses will be provided.

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Silver Spring, Md., Sep. 23, 1978.

1. The available presentation is keyed to this writer's handbook (modular learning unit) Understanding Foreign Peoples, completed for the Defense Intelligence School in March 1977.
2. This term refers principally to: the verbal and nonverbal messages between persons of different cultures; or, one's own perceptions of other culture-groups or their man-made environments.

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